

The break-up of the WRP: from the horse's mouth - Simon Pirani



An account by one of its former activists of the breakup of the UK Trotskyist group Workers Revolutionary Party following widespread sexual abuse by its leader, Gerry Healy in the mid-1980s. Trigger warning for discussion of sexual abuse.

In the controversy surrounding the Socialist Workers Party, and the way it has dealt with accusations of rape and sexual harassment by a leading member, the break-up of the Workers Revolutionary Party in 1985 has been referred to as a worst-case scenario. Warnings have been issued that, if the SWP is not careful, it will end up like the WRP. Such assertions imply that the WRP break-up was essentially a bad thing. As one of many former WRP members active in labour and social movements, I write this to argue that (i) the break-up was overwhelmingly a good thing, and (ii) while there are great dissimilarities between the two cases, there may be lessons of general relevance from 1985, about “revolutionary morality” and forms of working-class organisation. Even at this distance the break-up of the WRP is an emotional subject, for me at least, and I don’t want to pretend – as people often do in discussions on the left – to be rising “above” emotion or stating “objective” truths. This is just how I see it. Given how hard-won our experience was, the least we can do is to try to share it.

First, it is worth repeating some key facts about the WRP break-up. It was triggered by the expulsion of the group’s leader, Gerry Healy. He was charged with (a) sexual abuse of women party members, (b) physical violence against party members and (c) slandering David North, secretary of the US Workers League (a sometime WRP affiliate) as “a CIA agent”. The sexual abuse by Healy was on a completely different scale, and of a more extreme character, than the actions reportedly complained of in the SWP. The letter from Healy’s secretary, Aileen Jennings, that first raised the issue on the WRP’s leading committees, listed 26 alleged victims. This gave an indication of scale that justifies use of such terms as “repeated” and “widespread”.



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“repeated” and “widespread”.

The character of Healy’s offences is complex and worthy of proper analysis; any attempt to summarise will be flawed. In a leaflet published in 1986, I wrote: “A recent investigation by the WRP control commission, having taken written and verbal statements, showed that Healy had systematically taken advantage of his position of authority in the party to sexually abuse female comrades against their will.” A redacted version of the control commission’s report appears in the memoirs of my friend and comrade Norman Harding (who was a member of the commission); these are published on line. None of Healy’s victims complained to the police, and the old bastard died in 1989, without his crimes having been properly measured against legal criteria.

In 1986-87, WRP members sought through discussion to understand more clearly the power relations involved in Healy’s sexual abuse. One important theme was that aspects of it were comparable to incest. Many years later, in 2011, I gave a talk in which I tried to reflect this. I defined Healy’s abuses as “serial rape, such as might be practiced on girls by their fathers or uncles, or in institutions such as the Catholic church, and for which perpetrators might expect long jail sentences in cases where they are caught and tried”. The context was that the WRP

in some ways resembled a religious sect, an issue I also tried to tackle. (There is a list of links, including to sources mentioned, below.)

The WRP constitution provided that, in the case of alleged disciplinary offences, charges should be tabled, communicated to the member accused, and then heard by a party body. The charges against Healy were tabled, appropriately, by the central committee. Twenty-five CC

members voted in favour of doing so; 11 against; Healy disappeared and did not turn up to the meeting. Some of his 11 supporters formed a faction. A week later, when the charges were heard, they disappeared too; Healy was then expelled.

It is worth considering the grounds on which Healy's supporters argued against the charges being brought, despite the abundance of prima facie evidence. Their knee-jerk reaction was to claim that Healy was the victim of a state conspiracy. They have now had more than a quarter of a century to produce even a sliver of evidence to back up that worthless nonsense, and have failed. More important, to my mind, was their appeal to "revolutionary morality", i.e.

their belief that, since Healy was a significant revolutionary leader, our morality – as opposed to middle-class bourgeois morality – required that we defend him from any and every attack.

One of my abiding memories of 1985 is of a members' meeting in Scotland, where I lived, held in the week when Healy's supporters comprised a faction, i.e. after the charges had been tabled but before they had been heard. The meeting was addressed by the late Corin Redgrave (brother of Vanessa), for the CC minority, and myself for the CC majority. Redgrave opposed charging Healy, on the grounds that it would damage the revolutionary leadership. In discussion, a veteran member of the Scottish organisation asked Redgrave whether he could

"look me in the eye and tell me, honestly, that these charges are to your knowledge utterly without foundation", i.e. should not be brought because they were false. Redgrave replied by citing the WRP's achievements (publication of a daily Trotskyist newspaper, building of a big youth movement, influence in trade unions, etc) and concluded: "If this is the work of a rapist, let's recruit more rapists." (In other words, he knew the charges had substance, but thought they should be dropped because Healy's "party building" achievements rendered them irrelevant.) This statement deeply shocked those present, and we only managed with some difficulty to continue the meeting in good order.

If bogus "revolutionary morality" existed only as Corin Redgrave's depraved

caricature, it would be easy to dismiss. However there was a sense in which the pre-1985 WRP was held together by an apparently less crazy, less obscene (or perhaps just less fully-developed) version of this “morality” – the sense that we were a combat organisation, ordained by our ideology to bring certain truths to the working class and replace its treacherous leadership with our own, and that we had to do so on the basis of a set of moral precepts opposite to, and superior to, those of capitalist society. Redgrave was actually taking to extremes a position based on assumptions that I, certainly, had held for years.

I can best explain this in terms of my reaction to authoritarian and intimidating behaviour by WRP “leaders”. Like almost all WRP members, I was completely ignorant of Healy’s sexual abuse until the summer of 1985. (When I first heard allegations of it, I tried desperately to put them out of my mind – a complicated reaction I am happy to discuss, but won’t discuss here; once I understood more, I strongly supported bringing the charges against Healy.) But when it came to “leaders” bullying and demeaning militants, I could hardly have remained in the organisation without accepting it and becoming used to it. A good example of my

“revolutionary morality” was my reaction to the bullying and expulsion of a young militant –

let’s call him C – whom I recruited to the WRP in the late 1970s. In the mid 1980s, he had the temerity to express disagreement with various things, including the WRP’s erratic – and at times cowardly – attitude to the Irish Republican movement. At a CC meeting, Healy shouted at C, slapped him on the face and kicked him. C was not being beaten up; he was being humiliated by a very unfit man nearly three times his age. I sat there with the other fit young members of the CC and said nothing. A few months later C was beaten up, when, having been expelled, he tried to enter a meeting to question leading WRP members openly.

(I was not present.) Although I had recruited C – and we were friends, inasmuch as there was such a thing as friendship in our oh-so-hard combat organisation – I never once called him up, or even enquired about why it had been necessary to expel him, or why he had been beaten up. (Within weeks of Healy’s expulsion, I got back in touch with C, and we remain friends to this day.)

Unlike the sexual abuse, C’s humiliation and expulsion took place in broad

daylight. Many of us knew about it. In my view, our acceptance of such bullying in public created the sort of organisation within which Healy felt the confidence to practice serial sexual abuse in private.

What explains that acceptance? My memory long ago carefully blotted out details of the cowardice and indifference with which I must have regarded C once he developed

“differences”. But I know how I would have justified it to myself, since I justified so many unpleasant things in the same way: the party was the bearer of revolutionary tradition and alone could open the revolutionary road to the working class; its leadership was the vanguard, carrying out a historical mission; anything that obstructed that leadership had to be swept aside. If C was not prepared to take his place in this organisation, with all its imperfections, what use was he to the struggle? And if he could not take his place in the struggle, what was the point of worrying about him?

I used such logic to suppress my instinctive uneasiness about hierarchical and bullying behaviour by senior party members. Having joined the WRP as an energetic but

impressionable teenager – the best type of recruit for any sect – I soon learned to block off altogether any thoughts at all about authoritarian forms of organisation, the WRP’s complete indifference to issues of the oppression of women or gay rights, and many other things. The theoretical trick played by the likes of Corin Redgrave to justify the WRP’s regime was that, as revolutionaries, we based our behaviour on a set of moral considerations “higher” than

those of bourgeois society. Reference was made to Lev Trotsky’s pamphlet *Their Morals and Ours* ... although, on a close reading, even there Redgrave’s position is demolished. Trotsky argues that the ends justify the means, but cautions (a) that they do not justify all means, and (b) that the ends themselves have to be justified. Clearly, Healy’s abuses could only be justified in terms of “means” if one considered, as Redgrave did, that the construction of the organisation was not a means, but an end in itself. In the WRP’s case, once the construction of a “revolutionary” organisation, separate from the wider movement, was made the end in itself, it increasingly became the case that, in terms of means, “anything goes”.

When I say “separate from the wider movement”, this was not only in the sense of having distinct ideas, but separate in many other ways. In this respect, too, the WRP was an extreme example, with a staff of “professional revolutionaries” who, through no fault of their own, had little connection either with the workers’ movement or with student movements or other types of organisations. The implications for the late 20th century of Chapter II of the Communist Manifesto, which starts by asserting that communists “have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole” were never discussed. Hearteningly, it was WRP members’ genuine concern with, and connection to, the wider movement – particularly as it developed during the 1984-85 miners’ strike – that helped to ensure Healy’s rapid downfall, once the issue of sexual abuse was brought into the open. I now think that, in terms of the only “end” I understand – the movement to communism – the pre-1985 WRP was worse than useless as a “means”, so its break-up was good. And it was especially good that the issue of sexual abuse was placed at the centre.

As to how the cases of the WRP and SWP might be connected, I think that there are connections, and that they are not at all simple. Firstly, the WRP in some ways manifested a particularly extreme version of left-wing sectishness, and in other ways was a creature of a time now past (when so much trade union culture was so openly macho, and Jimmy Savile was in his prime). But it would be silly to ignore the connections on such grounds. In my view “revolutionary morality”, by means of which young people who set out to overturn oppression put their efforts into building organisations that end up reproducing aspects of hierarchy and alienation, is an abiding theme.

Secondly, it seems to me significant that not only the WRP but two left-wing organisations of the 2000s, the Scottish Socialist Party and Respect, foundered on “moral” issues. With Respect it was simple: the explicit defence of rape by the loathsome George Galloway resulted in resignations. The SSP case seemed to me less simple. The issue was not sexual abuse, or even sex. An issue was members lying to each other, I think; another was a culture of mistrust. These are “moral” issues too, and the WRP had them too.

For years after the break-up of the WRP, a few people who participated – and many more who did not – suggested that Healy’s sexual abuse was not “the central issue”, and that his

“political degeneration” was more important. As Cliff Slaughter (who, like all

the Marxist writers of the pre-1985 WRP, participated in the opposition to Healy) insisted from the start, sexual abuse was the central issue. What could be more important than unravelling and undoing the processes by which a “revolutionary” organisation – in however complicated a manner, and behind most of our backs – turned young women who sought to fight oppression into victims of an abusive “leader”? What process could be more immoral, from any truly revolutionary point of view? What on earth does all the talk about “fighting capitalism”

mean, if the forms of alienation that hold capitalism together are reproduced in

“revolutionary” organisations? And which of these forms of alienation could be more central

than the patriarchy and the distorted relations between men and women, that preceded capitalism but are essential elements of social relations dominated by capital? In my view, these and similar issues are of paramount importance. I welcome discussion of all this.

PS, for those who don't know me. I joined the WRP's predecessor, the Socialist Labour League, at the age of 14 in 1971; was on the WRP central committee from 1982; and after 1985 remained in a successor organisation (WRP/Workers Press) until 1995. I was the editor of the mineworkers' union newspaper, The Miner, 1990-95. Since 1990 I have travelled a great deal to Russia and Ukraine and written on Russian history; I am the author of The Russian Revolution in Retreat: Soviet workers and the new communist elite 1920-24. I am active in social and labour movements.

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